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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the current state of the secondary school English curriculum throughout the United States as amorphous, reactive, and without vital direction and offers suggestions for curricular improvement. The first half of the paper reviews the historical development of the English curriculum from World War II, touching on the emergence of the junior high concept and the effects of the Basic Issues Conference of 1958, the Dartmouth seminar of 1966, the behavioral objectives movement, Right to Read legislation, the growth of electives programs, and the back to basics movement. Suggestions for returning to "curricular sanity and respectability" in English center on inservice education efforts for teachers such as the Florida Teacher Education Centers (TECs), with English educators and secondary school English teachers involved in cooperative research on English curricula. Specific examples are offered to illustrate the kinds of inservice activities suggested. (AEA)

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The English Curriculum and T.E.C.

John S. Simmons

Looking at the way it is in the English curricula of U.S. secondary schools in the year 1980 is enough to give one pause and concern. This is particularly true when the "one" checking out the situation is an English Educator who has been around as long as I have. The 'pause' on which I wish to elaborate is to look at where we've been and how we arrived at where we are today. The 'concern' is for what I feel to be the current state of the Secondary English curriculum - amorphous, reactive and without vital direction. Before developing this concern, let's pause for a long moment.

As the English curriculum emerged from World War II, the public schools were in the midst of a most significant transition - from the 8-4, elementary-high school structure to a 6-3-3, elementary-junior high-senior high one. The junior high curriculum, presided over primarily by converted elementary teachers, was skill oriented - lots of traditional grammar, spelling,'round the room five-minute speeches, writing specified sentence patterns, periodic book reports and the like. There was then a sharp, unnatural transition to senior high where the focus was on literature. Most students caught genres in the 10th grade, American Lit in the 11th and English Lit in the 12th. Those were the days when the Harcourt Adventures series was selling to about 80% of the high school market and Silas Marner for some reason was being taught in 93% of the senior high curricula somewhere. This abrupt shift from skills to content became an issue of growing significance as the profession moved through the fabulous 50's.

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In 1957, the Soviet scientists launched their infamous space satellite Sputnik, an event which sent shock waves through the education establishment. (Incidentally, that was a helluva year for a confused ex G.I. to begin his English teaching career in the laboratory-demonstration school at the University of Minnesota). The fear that the Russians were beating us in the brain race affected even the teaching of English. Dramatic events such as the establishment of Project English curriculum centers, NDEA institutes, the CEEB's Commission of English and other such happenings spurred change - some real and some cosmetic. In my judgment, the thrust of the period was enunciated by the participants of the Basic Issues Conference of 1958 when they proclaimed that English was language, literature and composition, and that a curriculum which was sequential and cumulative could and should be established for Kindergarten through 12th grade.

Those adventurous years provided a lot of interaction among college English departments, English educators, and public schools. They sought to bring the curriculum up-to-date with the inclusion of transformational grammar, the New Rhetoric, close text analysis, archetypal criticism, and all that jazz. There were, however, at least three problems inherent in the movement.

1) The new curricular models were mostly designed by college English types. Little input came from the teachers, especially from the elementary ranks, regarding their needs and perspectives.

2) There may have been, as Neil Postman has so eloquently

stated, few if any sequential and cumulative children around to fit the curricular models.

3) We began integrating the schools in earnest about that time, and a whole new ball game in the teaching of English really began.

Then came the much publicized Anglo American seminar at Dartmouth in August 1966, a meeting attended by authorities on the teaching of English from the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom. Again, please note, this was a conference for mostly college types. The Americans came to meeting loaded with their academic English models and their sequential - cumulative philosophy. The British and Canadians countered with a student-centered, affective approach to the teaching of English. Their stress was on speaking and listening rather than reading and writing. With typical deference, most of the Americans ultimately allowed as how that was the way to go. Rather to be expected, isn't it, that we would defer to our British counterparts on how things should be done.

From the Dartmouth meeting on, for the next few years at least, came the hue and cry for student centered teaching in English. The English Journal, apparently anxious to become as radical chic as the next guy, was full of it. The new emphasis was on oral and dramatic activities with lots of concern for what students thought about, how they felt, and what they wanted to do. Writing was primarily unstructured and often billed as "creative." Media study, especially film, became very popular. I say that this movement took place after Dartmouth; I honestly feel that it was little

more than a popular notion among the more avant-garde oriented members of the English Education profession, and they were making these pronouncements from their universities amid the S.D.S. "down with everything" rallies and the We Want McGovern posters. What I'm saying is that the "movement" never did get far beyond textbooks imported from Great Britian, Benjamin DeMott diatribes, and speeches given at NCTE annual meetings. The secondary school English classrooms remained largely teacher centered and either academically or skills oriented. I vividly recall an FCTE banquet speech by a major American apostle of the student-centered approach, James Moffett. Given at our Hollywood meeting in 1972, it received the most negative audience response of any I can remember in my now eighteen years of membership in that council. To me the response was eloquent testimony that the spirit of the Dartmouth seminar had little effect on the real world of English teaching in Florida or elsewhere. In our state it served, more than anything else, to divide the ranks of a corps of English teachers still reeling from the effects on the state-wide walk-out of 1968.

Lest we forget the next era, that of the late 60's and early 70's, when the Behavioral Objectives movement made its way across the educational stage. Since it was a mandated fact of life in many states, this nuance probably had more impact on what teachers were doing in English than did that of the Dartmouth-Moffet one. At the very least, by administrative fiat, it caused a large number of English teachers to spend their after school hours writing one-sentence, threepart objectives with copies of Robert Mager's

clever little handbook close by. Many of us did the required work grudgingly. We tried to point out a few things that went right over the heads of our beneficent legislators and the turned-on bureaucratic camp followers from SDOE. What some of us were saying was:

1) A behavioral objective was just the start of the teaching process; what happens next, bwana?

2) May not this approach remove the teacher from the learning process to some degree?; i.e., that the teacher who becomes a manager of classroom activity also becomes effectively removed from the students.

3) What about the research in language growth and development which indicates pretty clearly that people don't tend to learn language via a Systems approach?

4) Can we get some straight talk about the significance of the affective domain in all this? (My feeling - we never did)

The B. O. Movement lingered for a few years and had the effect of denumanizing to some degree a curriculum now badly in need of the personal touch. There were apparantly some English teachers who, with their Behavioral Psychology gurus, were willing, maybe even anxious, to label their students as "products" and who contented themselves with writing lock-step packets, passing out worksheets and toting up numbers on score sheets for placement in individual folders - they called it "monitoring progress". The reaction of the "products" to all of this was something less than ecstatic. On the other hand, the true believers in USOE and most State

Departments of Education were having a field day as were ironically the Postmans, Wingarnters, Holts, Silbermans, Kozols and Kohls of the world who got yet another chance to say to us, "we told you so".

Concurrent with the B. O. Movement came the alleged national furor which culminated in the Right to Read legislation. The "reading people", who had been growing in numbers and financial support for some time, now entered Fat City. While much of this effort was and contintues to be commendable, the reading movement, in its extreme form, tended to be narrow, sterile, formulaic and often outmoded in approach. Thus, as reading became the big number around the country, the English curriculum was further sapped of its vitality and, more important, of considerable funding support. In school after school, particularly in middle schools and junior highs, "English" became "reading", and the broad study of literature was shoved on the back burner along with much of the composition and oral activity.

Reading gained, and continues to hold, a certain mystique with many educators, especially school administrators and district bureaucrats who apparently see the implementation of new reading programs as a systematically magic way to cure the ills of the moment. Having been involved in the teaching of reading in secondary schools for awhile now, my reaction is 'maybe'.

Whatever the ultimate results, there is no question that the words 'reading' and 'money' were not incompatible then (the early 70's, that is) nor are they now. And this rise in fortune of the reading establishment has been at the expense of English more than any other curricular area. Witness the steady decline in member-

ship of NCTE over the past ten years as compared with the huge increases in the ranks of IRA. Closer to home, I recall with sadness the 1977 FCTE meeting. It was housed in a moderate sized hotel adjacent to I-4 in Orlando. The meeting drew about 400 registrants. Just down the road, the FSRC was quartered in the luxurious Sheraton Olympic Village near Disney World. They had about 2,000 paying customers, and they heard from four speakers with large national reputations. All over the country principals and school board members seem to prick up their collective ears when teachers mention "reading" along about state meeting time. My experience has been that it ain't the same with English. Thus reading. It has, in my judgment, affected our English curricula both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As we have moved through the '70's and reading became the counterpart, supplement, and even replacement for ongoing English courses of study, the effect on what we were doing has been demostrable. But what were our initial reactions to Behavioral Objectives-Systems approaches and reading encroachments? Early in the decade, schools all over the nation turned to an Electives program of study. Begun with the federally supported APEX project in 1966, the trend to electives programs - phased, free, short term, semester, and otherwise - developed quickly. They gained considerable momentum when they took on for many English departments the role of an alternative to moving into a lock-step Systems approach. At its worst, as George Hillocks warned in his 1972 ERIC pamphlet, the Electives program vitiated any sense of continuity in English. Too many such programs were in fact bits and pieces. Courses

were proposed, prepared and presented on whim. Teacher "guidance" of students into appropriate offerings was often a joke. And worst of all, the program gave many teachers a chance to do what they always wanted to do - to regurgitate the great truths about literary masterpieces which they had faithfully noted at the knees of their university professors back in the halcyon days of their English major. They foisted these offerings off on kids who often couldn't understand the first sentence on the first page in the first chapter of The Brothers Karamazov, etc. Hillocks notes that more than 75% of the electives he reviewed were literary in nature. What those excesses did to extensive teaching of language and composition can only be guessed.

So where did we start moving in the mid '70's? Why Back to the Basics, of course. I won't waste your time with a review of the facts and figures, the legislation and public pronouncements, the Accountability hysteria and resulting minimum competency - functional literacy morass in which we now find ourselves. Instead I would like to point out what effect the growth of basic skills mandates has had on the secondary school English curriculum, which is the point of this entire historical odyssey.

Of all the trends and developments I have recounted, this most recent one has been the most demoralizing if not the most destructive. Reading exercises of various shapes and sizes have been substituted for literature. Writing has in too many instances devolved into a variety of sterile, form-completing exercises, totally devoid of any meaningful rhetorical context. Our whole-

sale return to the frantic embrace of Warriner's is ample testimony to our present legislature - induced malaise - as if this text series, which has been thoroughly discredited by all linguistic authority and which is at least 225 years out of date with reality, could solve any of our problems. The presence of those white and gold class texts on any classroom shelf should be a source of embarrassment to every person in this room. And I include myself among those who should evince that emotion. In my undergraduate course, "Backgrounds for Teaching Language," I have my students analyze the current Warriner's Third Course text, which contains a hefty chunk on grammar and usage. I do so because I am aware of the omnipresence of the series in secondary schools throughout the nation and I figure that an awareness of what is, should be a part of any teacher education program. At least, however, I do admonish my students of what the book doesn't do - namely to provide for development of abilities in speaking, writing or reading. That part of the course isn't much fun to teach.

Our present curriculum has also been reinforced by the addition of what in Florida is cryptically called "Comp Ed" these days. Money has been provided for hiring quasi - English teachers (in some Florida counties, available warm bodies will do) to teach basic communication skills to kids who have screwed up on statewide tests. What can be said about the realities of this situation - that it fragments communication into bits and pieces? That it has no actual place in a coherent English curriculum? That it is often administered by people with questionable backgrounds in the discipline? Yes, yes and yes. Mostly, however, it performs in a

direct manner what many of us are doing more furtively - teaching to THE TEST. Again, I indict myself as Dylan Thomas did in a 1952 speech at Boston University, thusly, "Myself among them, booming with the worst." In true Arthur Dimmesdale fashion, I confess that some of my workshops are functional literacy dog and pony shows of which I am not very proud. The compensatory education largesse offered by state legislatures and the resulting scramble to procure our share of it has been detrimental to the retention of coherence and progressivism in the current English curriculum.

So where we are today, as I pronounced at the start of this outpouring, is in a state of disarray. But enough of the gloom and doom. My main reason for speaking to you on this topic is to suggest some things which we can, repeat <u>can</u>, do to get back on the road to curricular sanity and even respectability in English. I want to suggest some general steps and then elaborate a bit on what I feel to be a mechanism available to us right now which has great potential value.

First, let's admit the truth - as we meet this year, the public secondary school English curriculum has no central focus or direction. I have attempted to develop and document that thesis in my long introduction. As John Dewey instructed us, to solve a problem, you've first got to recognize that it's there.

Second, we need to articulate the fact that many state legislatures clearly agencies outside the profession, has profoundly affected our curriculum. It has, with its many intrusive acts, forced us

into our current reactive stance. I applaud any and all efforts on the part of professionals to try their damnest to educate legislatures to the realities of language learning. We need to tell people in power what we need to do rather than to continue to listen to their ill informed, often antideluvian opinions.

Third, we need to work toward the reconciliation of our humanistic goals with the systematic teaching of language operations. To divorce them from each other, as we clearly have done in the last decade, presages the total fragmentation of our discipline. If we ever needed dynamic Curriculum Commissions it's right now.

Fourth, we need to get some University and public school people together to explore what opportunities for support of curriculum development and teacher education programs are currently being offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the new federal legislation on the Right to Basic Skills. It is clear that only those proposals which feature cooperation between the public schools and institutions of higher education are going to score. This is the kind of dialogue which, in my judgment, should run through a joint meeting such as this.

Fifth, we ought to put our heads together, as English Educators and secondary English teachers, to begin the dramatic expansion of school based, action research. At a recent seminar sponsored by F.S.U.'s College of Education, my distinguished colleague, Dr. Robert Gagné voiced an urgent plea for this kind of cooperative activity. While, as Gagné stated, this may appear to be "dirty"

research in the eyes of the pure physical scientists, it is badly needed in the public education sector at this time Certainly language learning of children and adolescents is now and will always be a high priority item on any school-based research laundry list. In the past, lots of cooperative research went awry because the University and school building types didn'ttrust or fully understand each other. That can be changed with a little self-conscious soul searching and critical listening on both sides.

Now for my high hard one, as Dizzy Dean used to say. We have a source of assistance for curriculum reorganization and development in place now if we are willing to exploit it. I am refering to in service adventures such as the Florida Teacher Education Center opportunity of which I suspect most of you are aware. Most school districts in Florida, either through individual counties or consortia, have established TEC's since the enactment of legislation passed in 1973. Very briefly, these centers provide funding for interaction between the districts and the state universities, or others educational agencies, to collaborate in the offering of in-service education services for teachers, administrators and other district personnel. I feel that this is the best currently available means of beginning a movement toward the description of an English curriculum which is contemporary, coherent, professionally respectable, and which meets the needs of our students.

The time is ripe. People like myself currently face small undergraduate populations in English Education. The teacher surplus

will keep it that way around here for the next several years, unquestionably. Thus, we have the time to spend working with groups of public school English teachers. There should be the added pay-off of teachers' receiving recertification credit as they work with us on curriculum projects in their schools throughout the state. In Florida the TEC provides us with the resources, indeed the mandate, to do so.

For the last several years, public school faculties in most other states have become quite stable. Whereas mobility used to characterize our English departments, today they remain pretty much the same year in, year out. What better chance, then, to sit down and plan a curriculum which will emanate from the people who have been in the school for awhile and which is likely to be used into the immediate future.

And, in case you're interested, there are lots of people teaching English in our country today who do not have English majors even after the National Interest and the Teaching of English furor of 20 years ago. The 1978 figures from Florida DOE reveal that about 32% of our public school teachers who have a total or partial English teaching assignment fall into that dubious category. Systematic in-service activity could help to fill some of the gaps in those backgrounds. My claim is that cooperative work on English curricula can be an excellent vehicle for in-service education. Much past in-service work scheduled in various locations has gained a measure of disrepute. Scheduling, usually utilizing after-school hours, has created some of those problems. The offering of the traditional two-hour workshop on some vaguely relevant topic has

been another; lack of real teacher input still another. Thus, the nature of TEC activity, in the service of teacher education in English and English curriculum development, needs a new look. Instead of mandates on what should be done being handed down from district offices, individual schools and groups of teachers within those schools should be making decisions on the nature, amount and direction of in-service activity. Example: an English department in a secondary school decides that it needs some curriculum change. It goes through an honest, intensive needs assessment. When that has been completed, the department calls for a particular kind of assistance through its in-service coordinator. An individual is found to provide consultative service. Together he/she and the department review the needs assessment at a mutually agreeable time. Together they plan for the consultant to work with the department on a plan for curricular change. Together they execute the plan, producing whatever materials and guidelines are seen as needed. Together they evaluate their product. Together they report their results to the district office. With the University they plan their follow-up and share the product with other school districts.

Example: A teacher in a school is having trouble with his/her English instructional techniques. A senior teacher, department head or administrator consults with that individual on his/her teaching problems and needs for assistance. A consultant is found who comes to the school on a regular basis and observes the individual's instruction. Together these two people critique the class periods observed. On a regular basis, the consultant reports to the

to the superior involved on the progress which has been made. At such time as genuine improvement is made, it is mutually decided that observations will be terminated. Final reports are then presented to the appropriate agencies.

Example: a group of English teachers in a given community but from different schools desire to receive instruction in some new curricular material or set of teaching strategies. They contact their in-service coordinator who solicits desired nearby consultants. Time is set up for a series of instructional packages which they then put into operation, as soon as possible, in their own classrooms. The consultant schedules a series of observations of those classes win which the packages are being used. He/she then conducts critiques, both individual and group, with the teachers in the project.

Example: a group of English department heads in a given district have hired some new teachers to deal with Compensatory Education. They come to realize that several of these teachers lack the kind of expertise necessary to do an effective job of working with the students who need help in various areas of basic communication skills. The principals call upon the in-service coordinator for some assistance through the arranging of some in-service sessions. The coordinator in turn contacts appropriate instructors in basic skills activity. The instructors work out a flexible schedule of sessions with the teachers in question, meeting with them at a common, predetermined site. Together the university person and the Compensatory Education teachers develop materials and strategies

useful in working through the skills with those elementary or secondary youngsters who are in need.

There is nothing very new about the kinds of activities previously described; it's just that they probably don't typify the in-service activity today. One of the reasons for this current state of affairs is that the once-aweek Tuesday afternoon workshop approach still holds sway. It need not; smaller groups of teachers with needs such as those described above can find many ways to adjust schedules within their schools. There is no reason that the duration of the in-service activity can't be kept flexible. In-service funds can be used on occasion for substitute teachers to be employed - for small groups in in-service situations. Or maybe team teaching strategies and large group activities for several classes supervised by an administrator or substitute teacher could be arranged. Such accommodations can be done with deliberation when a basic plan for instruction of groups of teachers has been established.

The foregoing examples have been described to illustrate, in concrete terms, a variety of useful activities which can be promulgated through such vehicles as Florida's T.E.C.'s. My major recommendation, of course, is to use this mechanism for the initiation of an effort to develop a discernible English curriculum for the schools in which we teach and for whom people like me train teachers. Clearly there are problems to be faced, but in the light of our present sad curricular state, I feel that it's worth our best shot.

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